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HTY 400: Senior Seminar—World's Fairs and Exhibitions

Film as a Primary Source: The Collective and the Individual in Northeast Historic Film Footage of the
1939/1940 New York World's Fair

Looking through a camera lens is a selective and distancing process. The very act of restricting one's vision via a camera lens is not only sensory deprivation, but it is also a physical barrier between the object and the person experiencing it. The moment a camera operator's field of vision is narrowed by the rectangular frame of the camera, choices have to be made as to what, how, how long, how fast and what angle—even for the novice camera operator. Once someone makes these most basic choices they become critics of their surroundings, and such decisions ultimately shift the way one sees a person, place, or thing. Though we may never revisit the 1939/1940 New York World's Fair and experience it for ourselves, we can interpret—through the camera lens—how people perceived the fair and what they critically decided to film. Through the eyes of Earle Shettleworth Sr. we are given a rare glimpse into his proclivities as well as the shared interests of fellow fairgoers in New York. His passion for architecture and his interests in historic preservation can be seen in what and how he chose to film the fair's surroundings. Choosing slow sweeping horizontal and vertical shots Mr. Shettleworth took in his surroundings with careful, documentary-like camera shots. Although his interests appear to be on architecture and sculpture (he spent a great amount of time filming buildings and their surrounding sculptural programs) there are also certain commonalities shared with other films taken at the fair by some fellow Mainers. These differences and similarities provide for historians an understanding of how individuals shared common cultural interests in the fair as well as how a variety of individuals visually interpreted the fair independently, and according to their own interests.

What is striking about the footage from Mr. Shettleworth was how it, like the other films from Mainers at the fair, shared many of the same visual features. Through the similarities of the footage, we can obtain a sense of the collective impact the fair had on its participants. We can venture to ask

questions about what these visitors liked, what they were drawn to, and what they deemed important. With the outbreak of World War II, it is significant that almost all of the footage of the fair, including Mr. Shettleworth's, featured Russia, Italy, and Poland (a country that was wiped off the map of Europe during the fair)—setting up a visual drama and tension that was taking place in current events. It proves that people were interested not only in cultural events, but in recording them for posterity. The interest in European aggression was also coupled with interests in entertainments at the fair and capturing iconographic shots of the Trylon and Perisphere. If the fairgoers felt an obligation to record history in the making, they also felt a need to record the spectacles of the fair to remember and share back home. A short list of shared footage shows that almost everyone visited the scandalous and scantily clad aquatic dancers at Billy Rose's Aquacade, including Mr. Shettleworth, who spent a dangerously long time lingering on the midriffs of certain young female entertainers (one of the few times he used the zoom feature on his camera). Some footage also showed the interior "World of Tomorrow," with little success in capturing anything but murky shadows. The nighttime illuminated water show was also a favorite of fairgoers. And, of course, either out of obligation or state pride, they all visited their own state's exhibition building, in this case, Maine. These films critically pick out the best and the most exciting of these entertainments to relive in film but they also reveal a dualistic quality of the fair participant—on the one hand they were keenly aware of cultural events and obligations, and on the other hand, they were enjoying the broad spectrum of entertainment that the fair had to offer.

Despite the similarities in footage, it is important to find what makes these amateur films individualized and different; in the differences there are revelations about individuals and even insights into history. The quality of the footage varies from person to person, and how each person negotiated the camera was different as well. Such differences always remind us that an individual stood behind the lens. The unique and distinct alterations between each film can change the intent and the perception someone has of the fair. For example, Mr. Shettleworth focused on architecture and sculpture, more so than any of the other camera operators. Because of his interest in the fair's architecture and sculpture,

the viewer is left to visually assess the infrastructure and design of the fair. Mr. Shettleworth had the opportunity to take footage of a time sensitive event, that of the U.S. military walking in formation down one of the main corridors. Because it was an event that doesn't show up in other footage, it is hard to say if it happened daily, or if this was a special event; either way we do know that it was an event that was in direct conflict with the fair's objectives: to create an alternate future of peace. The presence of military and militarized technologies was one of many reasons why the theme of the "World of Tomorrow" was abandoned in 1940 for a nostalgic theme entrenched in the past. Here, Mr. Shettleworth provides historians with visual evidence that clarifies the reason why the New York World's fair failed in its 1939 objectives. We may never know why he made the choice to film that particular event, that is the beauty and frustration with primary sources—they are often incomplete—but his choice reveals to us a piece of the fair's history that provides us with a more complete understanding of its metamorphosis in 1940.

The variety in primary film sources provides a more complete understanding of how people experienced the fair as a collective and as individuals. Evidence can be found in the collective visual footage of film and photography but it can also be found in the selectivity and timing of individuals. These films give a picture, though incomplete and far from thorough, of the New York World's Fair that reveals the way people both collectively and independently prioritized their experiences. These films are personalized expressions of individuals who shared collective interests with other fairgoers but remained unique to their own identities. As primary sources they are naturally incomplete and ought to be supplemented with other sources, but they are essential in enriching our understanding of the 1939/1940 New York World's Fair.